

String Theory

Have you ever had an experience that suggested someone else was in your house, and just thought “I don’t wanna know” and left it? Sometimes, fear of the unknown just seems like the preferable option than facing a real, concrete danger. Normally it’s nothing, though. One time, the beeper function of my wireless housephone went off, when I was the only one home. It could only be called from the living room. Another time, I swear someone took some change from my desk. They’re all probably just slightly disconcerting tricks of the memory.

But what would you do when something truly suggestive happens? Would you run, or just ignore it, like I did?

Last Monday was a normal day. I got up, brushed my teeth, changed into school clothes... All little parts of my morning ritual. It seemed like it would be another totally un-noteworthy day, until I saw the strings.

There were three or four thick twine strings in my room. They criss-crossed between the walls around my bed, one attached to the door. No way would I have missed them before; I should have tripped over them. They were tied to pins in the walls, which had also not existed before ten seconds ago.

Nobody could have been in my room while I was in it, let alone set this up. It was early, and my brain wasn’t processing correctly. I simply discredited the sight, untied the strings and left for school, leaving them balled up on my desk.

It didn’t get any better later. Outside my house there were hundreds of them, tied between houses, around cars, across streets... This had to be some super elaborate prank. One of those hidden camera shows, or a comedy improv blog. They had gotten everyone else to play along too; passer-bys were tangled in them, tying them to objects they were walking towards and away from, as if they had been and were continuing to follow the course laid out for them.

I nervously continued my journey to school. On the bus, every except me was tied to the door. At school, groups of friends were tied to each other; teachers were tied to their desks and boards. Oddly enough, at this point all I could wonder was why I had been left out.

When my friend Lucy sat beside me in first period, she simply plonked her bag down on my lap and rested her chin in her hand, looking right past me to the window outside.

“Hey Lucy.”

No response.

“Come on, I didn’t expect you to be in on this too. “

She sighed and started taking books from her bag. All the books were tied to her hands. I grinned, and yanked one of the strings off a book. She didn’t seem to notice, instead simply disregarding the book completely, letting it drop to the floor without a moment’s hesitation.

“Um.” I leaned down, picking up her book and placing it back on her desk. She took no notice.

“Well, if that’s how we’re gonna play it.” I smiled, trying to look playful, but really just trying to hide my nervousness. I bundled all the strings attached to her together with one hand, then pulled them all free.

She blinked, turning to stare at me.

“Holy crap, Martin. You’re like a ninja or something.”

“I’ve been sitting here for maybe ten minutes.” I smiled again, relieved my friend had finally “noticed” me.

“Where did all these strings come from??” She gasped, seemingly noticing for the first time.

“I assumed you were all fucking with me...”

She stood up, backing into a corner. No one else in the class noticed.

“They weren’t here just a minute ago! Do you see them too??” Her tone made it clear she was genuinely scared.

“No. Didn’t you-. “ I was interrupted by my teacher slamming the door behind her. Everyone except me and Lucy murmured a good morning, and still, no one seemed to pay either of us any notice. “People have been ignoring me all day.” I said to Lucy, before turning to our teacher. “Hey! Dumb bitch! You can’t teach for shit!”

No reaction.

“I’m getting away from all this shit.” Lucy pulled a few strings aside and left the class. I followed, and surprise-surprise, no one else noticed.

We wandered the corridors, leaving and entering classes as we saw fit. Whenever we untied a chair or book from someone else, it was like it suddenly didn’t matter to them. It didn’t exist.

I showed her the street outside; there were more strings than when I came in this morning. Twice as many. We carefully picked our way through the tangle, making our way to a nearby coffee shop. Not particularly grand, I know. But what would you do in our situation? As I said, fear of the unknown sometimes seems like the safer option. On a few occasions, I suggested we untie a few more people. Lucy was opposed to it, remembering how terrified she’d been.

In the coffee shop, we grabbed a couple of sandwiches and drinks from the fridge. We found a table, untied all strings attached to the chairs, and sat down. We both ate in silence, both of us too scared, both of us distracting ourselves by watching the strangers in the shop, oblivious to the strings.

After twenty minutes, Lucy spoke up. "Now she's gonna take that sandwich." She said, pointing at a woman across the shop. Sure enough, she walked to the fridge and took the plastic wrapped sandwich she was tied to. "She pays for it and leaves." She did so, according to the prophecies of the strings. "That guy doesn't intend to pay." I watched as a man took his coffee and ran out of the store, the two servers just looking too exasperated to go after him.

"This is horrible." She whimpered. "Let's go. Please."

Outside wasn't much better. Everyone just followed the strings' instructions, going about their daily lives. Lucy announced she was going home to sleep this off, and I agreed to walk her home. She only lived ten minutes away.

Away from the busier part of town there were fewer strings. It was nicer; we could pretend it wasn't happening.

When we turned onto Lucy's street, she stopped, her mouth falling open.

"What now?" I broke the silence, my voice sounding surprisingly small.

"Look." She pointed outside one of her neighbours houses.

I saw it clearly, and I'll take my memory of that moment 'til the day I die. A little dark imp, maybe three feet tall, walking along with its knuckles on the ground, almost like a monkey. It had two bulbous yellow eyes taking up about half its face, and no mouth or any other facial features. It was holding a hammer and a ball of twine, which it was letting out behind it.

It walked quickly and quietly from the front door of the house to the mailbox. It stopped, hammered a nail into the side of the box, and tied it's string around it. It turned to face us, and stopped when it spotted us.

My bottom fell out even further than it had already been, but it just stared with a look of surprise and curiosity. You could almost say it was the more frightened one. Suddenly, it beckoned to us with its tiny hand.

I looked at Lucy, she hadn't moved. I looked back at the imp, which stared at me.

I halved the distance between us, and then halved it again. This wasn't fear of the unknown anymore; it was fear of this little guy. Didn't seem like anything to be scared of. When I was a meter away from it, it extended its hand.

"Uh. Hi." I shook it. It nodded in approval, blinking its massive yellow eyes up at me.

"So you're the ones in charge of the strings?" It nodded eagerly. I called Lucy over, but she stayed where she was.

"There are more of you?" Another nod. I wanted to ask it so many questions, about what it was and where it came from, but it seemed for now I was stuck with only yes or no questions.

"Do we even have free will?"

It just looked at me, almost sadly. I immediately felt sick to my stomach, and couldn't bear looking at the little monster anymore. I grabbed Lucy, who had been listening to our exchange, and now sat on the curb with her head in her hands.

"Come on."

We entered her house, and I made her a cup of tea. When I found her in the living room, she had untied her dog and was curled up with it, crying. I set the tea down and sat beside her.

"I'm so scared." She whispered after a good ten minutes of sobbing. I didn't answer. I couldn't.

"I'm going to sleep" She mumbled suddenly, and was under

within the minute. Sleep was starting to sound pretty good all of a sudden, my eyelids suddenly felt like they were being weighed down.

I collapsed to the rug, and the last thing I heard before I fell asleep was the scurrying of several sets of little feet nearby.

I felt much better the next day, as if the whole affair had been a dream. I'd probably have believed that if I hadn't been awoken by Lucy's mother that morning, wondering what I was doing sleeping over without permission or something.

Over breakfast, Lucy asked me why I looked so pale and nervous. I turned to her and smiled, mumbling something to her about feeling sick.

But the truth was, I was scared because I couldn't see any strings, and was wondering whether my actions were truly my own.